



A banner hung up by basement operators in a housing estate in southern Beijing to protest against the district authorities' moves to evict them and their tenants.



A migrant worker in a basement apartment two floors beneath ground in the south-west of Beijing. PHOTO: SIM CHI YIN



Migrant tenants in the washing and bathroom area in a basement apartment. The tunnels, with more than 100 rooms, were clean and tidy. PHOTO: SIM CHI YIN

Beijing puts squeeze on migrant workers, shutting down their basement homes

By SIM CHI YIN
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

BEIJING: By day, Mr Ding Renwu, 26, installs wood flooring in new high-rise apartments all over Beijing. By night, he returns to his 6 sq m room two floors beneath the ground on the capital's outskirts.

Like many others in the migrant worker army that keeps Beijing running, Mr Ding lives in a tiny room partitioned out of a basement tunnel or air raid shelter.

Now this population of some one million migrant basement dwellers – unkindly labelled the “rat tribe” in the local press – is threatened with extinction.

Citing safety concerns, the city's authorities plan to flush them out within three years, government officers revealed to The Straits Times this week, acknowledging long-rumoured directives.

Mr Ding's basement home, south-west of the city, faces imminent closure. District authorities have plastered eviction notices across 17 basements in the neighbourhood since July, as part of a campaign since late last year to shutter the thousands of basement homes beneath apartment blocks, offices and hotels all over Beijing.

It is seen as part of a tightening squeeze Beijing is putting on migrant workers, who serve as the backbone of the capital's economy but also strain its resources. Recently, the authorities demolished 24 schools for migrant workers' children because they were “unsafe”.

Mr Liu Xianfa, a Henan native who operates a basement with 117 rented rooms that now face a shutdown, said: “It's clear that the city's government is trying to clear out us low-income migrants, though they'll never say it clearly because it will cause too much anger.”

Likewise, on the schools' closure, migrants' advocate Zhang Zhiqiang said: “The authorities think if the children have no school to attend, they will leave and hence the parents will leave too.”

Beijing has long been a melting pot of people from all over the country and is a magnet for migrants from its rural hinterland. They work on construction sites and in restaurants, shops, offices and homes – doing jobs that Beijingers shun.

Official data shows Beijing's population has already hit 19.6 million, shattering the government's target of 18 million by 2020. Migrants make up more than one-third of residents, and their numbers have leapt by more than seven million since 2000, according to a Blue Book released by the official Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in July.

The study predicts that the migrant population could continue to increase by an average of about 700,000 annually for at least the next 20 years.

Every day, Beijing residents and the swelling ranks of migrants jostle for precious little space on the subway and on roads, and for diminishing water resources in the parched capital.

“Officials and some academics have ex-

pressed in the last few months that Beijing's population has become too large,” Professor Chan Kam Wing, a geographer at the University of Washington who studies China's labour migration and urbanisation, told The Straits Times.

“The middle class relies heavily on the low-cost services of migrants, from nannies, restaurant waitresses and plumbers, to those who are cleaning the street, to function,” he said.

“On the other hand, migrants are poor, and are frequently perceived as unclean and committing more crimes by many urban folks. We all know that there is poverty in China but the middle class does not want to see it up close.”

Beijing's efforts to hem in its migrant population started last year, when the municipal authorities built fences around migrant communities, ostensibly to “reduce crime” and “improve public order”.

This year, it slashed by two-thirds the number of *hukou* or residence permits for Chinese students from other cities who graduated from Beijing's universities, the local press reported.

But the move that has stirred the biggest public and press reaction so far is the destruction of migrants' schools just days before the start of the school term last week. In China, public services like health care and education are still largely granted only to residents with a local *hukou*. For migrant workers' children, the on-

Plight of the RAT PACK

ly option is to attend illegal, privately run schools on the outskirts of the city.

The demolition of 24 migrant schools left 14,000 students without classrooms. The fate of the remaining 100 or so such

schools hangs in the balance.

Some observers say the local governments intended to make money by leasing the land these schools sit on as the city sprawl reaches the outskirts. Others allege that the district authorities have started their own profit-making migrant schools.

The education bureau of Haidian district in west Beijing said in a written reply to The Straits Times that 2,000 of the 3,200 affected migrant children had been re-registered in other schools. Some children have packed up and gone home.

Mr Zhu Daojing, principal of Dongba Lantian School which was shut down, said in an interview that a few students could not find a new school and about one-third of his 860 students had gone home to their villages and towns.

That is what basement-dwelling migrants like Mr Ding might soon have to do. The renovation worker, who earns 4,000 yuan a month, rents his small partitioned room underground for 400 yuan.

He said: “Where are we to live otherwise? Far outside the city? It's not possible because traffic is so bad and we won't be able to get to and from work. If things get really bad here, I will just go home.”

It will not be as easy for the operators of the thousands of basement residences – themselves migrants – to up and go.

In the mid-2000s, the Beijing government had encouraged the conversion of

the city's basements for residential use, prompting thousands of enterprising migrants to get into the business, leasing the tunnels, renovating them and renting them out as homes for the low-income.

Mr Zhao Lianfeng, a farmer from north-eastern Jilin, sold his house, transferred his land and moved his family of six to Beijing to run a 140-room basement which he poured his life savings and loans of 900,000 yuan into renovating.

In recent weeks, the authorities had given him and his tenants notice to leave, and locked shut one of the two exits from his basement. He sawed open that lock last week.

Mr Liu Hailing, a staff member of the Fengtai district office, which oversees the estate, said in a telephone interview: “Those basements were illegally converted for residential use... They are unhygienic and dangerous. Residents in the apartments above have complained that basement dwellers are a disturbance.”

Mr Zhao disputes that. While the basement was, on paper, meant for storage, he said he was given permission to renovate it for residential use and has paid rent for the past three years. He said the police and fire department inspect the place, which is teeming with tenants, two to three times a year. “And now suddenly they say this is all illegal and unsafe, and we have to shut down?” he asked.

In different districts of Beijing, basement operators – some of whom have lease contracts that run for a few more years – have banded together and held sporadic public protests.

Their demands for compensation have locked them in confrontation with the government and slowed plans to close down all of Beijing's residential basements in one fell swoop, civil defence officers told The Straits Times in telephone interviews this week.

An officer, who gave his name only as Mr Jiang, said: “When we started this campaign at the end of last year, our plan was to close all of them down in three months. But with all these demands for compensation, we couldn't continue and have slowed the closures. We now plan to clear them out within three years.”

He added: “The basements are unsafe, and they are dirty and chaotic. They're unsuitable as housing.”

Voicing a view that many operators interviewed hold, Mr Zhao said: “I won't leave if they don't at least give me back the money I put in. It is just not possible. We've moved our lives here. We have nothing to go home to.”

Whether evicting a million migrants from their basement homes or shuttering their children's schools, Beijing is walking a tightrope in its efforts to curb the migrant population, said observers.

Prof Chan said: “A large disenfranchised population, especially now that they are in the city, and the large gaps between the rich and the poor side by side are a source of social unrest.”

✉ chiyin.sim@gmail.com

Additional reporting by Lina Miao



Basement operator Zhao Lianfeng sawed open a lock that was used to seal off one of two exits from his basement after the authorities – seeking to evict him and tenants from his 140 rooms – closed it off recently. He is demanding compensation. PHOTO: SIM CHI YIN